

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 3307

E.O. 11652: XDGS-4
TAGS: PINT, SY
SUBJ: SYRIAN PEOPLE'S COUNCIL SHOWS SIGNS OF LIFE

1. IN AN ATTEMPT TO STIMULATE INTEREST IN THE PEOPLE'S
COUNCIL ELECTIONS LAST SUMMER, PRESIDENT ASSAD PROMISED A
MORE PROMINENT ROLE FOR THAT MORIBUND BODY. AFTER DIS-
APPOINTINGLY LOW ELECTION TURNOUT, COUNCIL APPEARED TO
REVERT TO FORM AS A DEPENDABLE RUBBER STAMP FOR THE REGIME
WHILE MEMBERS WERE FEELING THEIR WAY IN UNFAMILIAR ROLES
AND TESTED THE LIMITS OF ASSAD'S PROMIS.

2. SINCE THE APPOINTMENT OF FORMER TRADE UNION LEADER
MAHMUD HADID AS COUNCIL PRESEDENT AND THE APPOINTMENT OF
FORMER COUNCIL PRESIDENT ALI AL-HALABI AS PRIME MINISTER,
THE COUNCIL HAS BEEN SHOWING SIGNS OF LIFE AND
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IS BEINNING TO ACT AS A SORT OF WATCHDOG ON MINISTERIAL
ACTIVITIES. EMBASSY PREVIOUSLY REPORTED COUNCIL'S ROLE
IN PARTIAL ROLLBACK OF FUELOIL PRICE INCREASE. WE ARE ALSO
TOLD THAT HADID MET WITH THE LOCAL JOURNALISTS
AND INFORMED THEM THAT THE COUNCIL SESSIONS WOULD BE
COMPLETELY OPEN TO THEM EXCEPT IN CASES INVOLVING NATIONAL
SECURITY. HE WANTED THEM TO FEEL FREE TO COME TO ALL

SESSIONS AND REPORT FREELY ON THE COUNCIL'S ACTIVITIES. ACCORDING TO AP STRINGER FARES, THUS FAR, HADID HAS BEEN AS GOOD AS HIS WORD. IN FACT, FOR FIRST TIME IN OUR MEMORY PRESS PUBLISHED MEMBERS' CRITICISM OF PRIMIN HALABI'S REMARKS ON FOREIGN POLICY MAY 29 (SEPTTEL). WHILE OPEN CRITICISM OF DOMESTIC POLICY HAS BEEN PERMITTED IN PAST, FOREIGN POLICY CRITICISM HAS BEEN TABOO.

3. FURTHERMORE, THE MINISTERS MUST NOW TAKE THE COUNCIL MORE SERIOUSLY. ONE MINISTER RECENTLY COMPLAINED TO US AID DIRECTOR THAT HE IS REQUIRED ALMOST EVERY OTHER DAY TO ATTEND COUNCIL SESSIONS. JOURNALISTS REPORT THAT IN CONTRAST TO PAST INDIFFERENCE TO DEPUTIES, MINISTERS ARE NOW TAKING COPIOUS NOTES WHEN QUESTIONS ARE RAISED ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES OF THEIR MINISTERIES AND REPORTING BACK TO THE COUNCIL ON THEIR FINDINGS. PEOPLE'S COUNCIL STAFF TELL US THE NUMBER OF QUESTIONS POSED BY MEMBERS HAS MORE THAN DOUBLED OVER PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE DURING PAST HALF YEAR. STAFF AND MINISTERIES ARE HAVING TROUBLE COPING WITH FLOOD OF QUESTIONS.

4. WHILE HADID IS NOT GENTEALLY POPULAR OUTSIDE PARTY AND TRADE UNION CIRCLES, HE HAS A REPUTATION OF STANDING UP TO THE PRIME MINISTER, ECONOMIC MINISTRIES, AND STATE COMPANIES WHEN THE INTERESTS OF HIS CONSTITUENTS ARE INVOLVED. SOME PEOPLE CLAIM HE WAS APPOINTED TO THE COUNCIL TO GET HIM CONFIDENTIAL

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AWAY FORM THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT. NEVERTHELESS, IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT HADID ON HIS OWN COULD ENHANCE THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL ROLE WITHOUT THE BACKING OF ASSAD AND THE SYMPATHY OF HIS PREDECESSOR HALABI.

5. ASSAD HAS BEEN PROMOTING THE IDEA OF LIBERALIZING THE POLITICAL SYSTEM SINCE SUMMER OF 1977 AND MOST RECENTLY REITERATED HIS INTENTION TO DO SO DURING HIS INAUGURAL ADDRESS TO THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL ON MARCH 8, A THEME WHICH WAS REPEATED IN HALABI'S SPEECH MAY 29. BAATH PARTY OFFICIALS TELL US THE GOAL IS TO DEVELOP A SYSTEM WHICH FALLS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE SOCIAL DEMOCRACIES OF EUROPE AND THE COMMUNIST REGIMES OF EASTERN EUROPE AND THE SOVIET UNION. PREVIOUSLY, THERE HAS BEEN LITTLE CONCRETE EXPRESSION GIVEN TO THESE STATED GOALS AND SOME WOULD ARGUE THAT ASSAD HAS, IF ANYTHING, ENCLOSED HIMSELF EVEN MORE TIGHTLY IN HIS CIRCLE OF KEY SECURITY, MILITARY, AND POLITICAL ADVISORS.

6. HOWEVER, WITH THE ECONOMY STILL IN TROUBLE AND A NOTABLE INCREASE OF REGIME CRITICISM IN MAJOR CITIES, ASSAD SEEMS TO BE TRYING TO OPEN UP THE SYSTEM, AT LEAST SUPERFICIALLY, TO GIVE THE PEOPLE THE FEELING THAT THE GOVERN-

MENT DOES BELONG TO THEM AND IS WORKING ON THEIR BEHALF.
THE EVIDENCE OF MOVEMENT IN THIS DIRECTION IS THUS FAR
SLIGHT, BUT HALABI HAS PROMISED NEW EFFORTS TO EXPAND
POPULAR PARTICIPATION, PARTICULARLY AT THE LOCAL ADMINISTRA-
TIVE LEVEL. ONE POSSIBLE PORTENT OF THE TIMES WAS A SIX-
HOUR MEETING ASSAD HELD JUNE 1 WITH BAATH PARTY DOUNDER
SALAH BITAR. BITAR HAD REFUSED SUCH A MEETING FOR SOME
TIME DUE TO HIS BELIEF THAT SYRIAN BAATH REGIME WAS NOT
LIVING UP TO THE CONCEPT HE ESPOUSES OF A LIBERAL AND
POPULARLY BASED BAATH PARTY. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN
WHETHER ASSAD CAN MAKE THE PEOPLE FEEL THEY ARE POLITICAL
PARTICIPANTS WITHOUT DILUTING EXECUTIVE AUTHORITY, AND
CREATING MORE PROBLEMS THAN HE NOW FACES. HE WILL WANT
TO AVOID AT ALL COST SADAT'S EXPERIENCE OF RAPID
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LIBERALIZATION AND SUBSEQUENT RETRENCHMENT SINCE HE DOES
NOT HAVE SADAT'S BROAD BASE OF FELLAHIN SUPPORT TO FALL
BACK ON. THUS ASSAD CAN BE EXPECTED TO MOVE CAUTIOUSLY;
POSSIBLE SO MUCH SO THAT HIS EFFORTS WILL DO LITTLE TO STEM
CURRENT CRITICISM OR TO STIMULATE THE BODY
POLITIC INTO MORE ACTIVE SUPPORT FOR HIS POLICIES.
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